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The Gerald Kelly Lecture presented to the National Federation of Catholic Physicians Guilds, Atlantic City, New Jersey, June 20, 1971.

"Respectful dialogue" within the Roman Catholic community and across denominational lines on the subject of abortion is seen as a most compelling "ecumenical imperative" for the Catholic physician. Fr. Bowman's definition and description of "respectful dialogue" come from many years toil in the ecumenical vineyard.



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The Ecumenical Opportunity of American Catholic Doctors in 1971

David J. Bowman, S.J.

You have no doubt heard talks on our blessed Lord as Healer, with a good biblical development on the subject. As Jim Masterson has remarked, my Scriptural competence, such as it is, relates to the Gospel according to St. Mark. In the public ministry of our Lord there, the two great themes are the ministry of teaching and the ministry of healing, and the two are inter-connected. Since my purpose today is somewhat narrowed to the title above, I shall do no more than mention this common theme for you as imitating our Lord in His healing ministry.

One other obvious connection within our title is the fact of healing within the various churches of our country. You as ecumenical Catholic men are

no doubt well aware of faith-healing as a phenomenon within all churches and very common within some. The Christian Scientists, who are not ordinarily considered as a "church," by themselves or by mainline Christians, have their own healing life as a central part of their churchly identity. Holiness and Pentecostal Churches frequently stress faith healing almost as centrally as the Christian Scientists do. Lourdes and Fatima come quickly to our Catholic minds as places where healing whether by faith or other means occurs regularly and sometimes apparently miraculously. All of us accept the Epistle of James, with its clarion call for prayer for a sick man. "... and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins he will be forgiven." (5/15.)

One of the things we need to do is establish a reconciling dialogue within the Catholic community among those who are still serious about the Church. An editorial in the *New York Catholic News* for June 10, 1971, speaks of the problem we now seem to have across the country of polarization toward the right and toward the left.

"The problem of the Catholic left is not that it is deeply concerned with the issues of peace, racism, and injustice, but that it is so concerned with attaining the moral purity which these issues demand that they spend too much time 'gazing into their religious navels,' time which would be far better spent rebuilding, through political action and through traditional, but vital areas. But if the Catholic right is vocal in its criticisms of the Catholic left, neither is it building. The right is so concerned with preserving institutions and traditions, that it often loses sight of the call to Christian service.

If the Catholic left is overly concerned with itself, and if the Catholic right exists only to cajole the Catholic left, then who remains to do the building?"

My suggestion to you today is that *you* are some of those remaining to do this building. My "message" to you today is that the ecumenical opportunity opened up for you now is to help build the firm home of respectful dialogue among Christians and other men of good will concerning the abrasive topic of abortion and abortion-laws.

Before we attempt the treatment of this, however, let us recall the ecumenical change which has taken place in the Roman Catholic Church lately. To do this, I shall quote from recent writings of Cardinal Jan Willebrands, head of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome. He makes a special theme of "the one ecumenical movement." His intention is to stress

the God-given unity that all Christians enjoy through the Holy Spirit poured out upon us. Within the churchly movement inspired by God through Christ, men and women all over the world are realizing their opportunity to bear witness to redeeming grace through cooperative prayer, evangelical study and the works of mercy. The one Spirit moves us toward the one Church to be realized more and more here on earth, although perhaps never in its full perfection. The unity of God's Church, then, is a dynamic reality, not a static possession. We do not know, then, all the ways in which God will drive His Church on in the midst of a changing and confusing world. One of the things we do know is that He wants us Christians (with no disrespect for our Jewish and other brethren) to manifest His loving and reconciling presence in our world. We cannot do this without loving one another. We cannot love one another without knowing and living with one another as opportunity offers.

God's will, in Christ, impels all Christians toward a life that is unlimited. No single church, even the Roman Catholic Church, claims to possess in its fullness the entirety of Christ's saving grace. No single church is adequate within itself to bear sufficient witness to God's love of the world. The ecumenical movement is exactly that; it is not an organization. Yet each ecclesial community is called to participate in the life that is larger than itself.

Cardinal Willebrands spoke of this to the Consultation on Church Union meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, in March of 1969.

"Each church is asked by God to contribute, according to its conscience, whatever can bring about the full invisi-

ble and visible unity that Christ wills for His family, in order that the world may believe. The movement expresses itself in a whole series of initiatives: prayer, study, experiments in joint witness, and for our purposes here, church union plans. Since the Catholic Church is a partner in the one ecumenical movement, it cannot remain indifferent to any one of its manifestations." ("COCU, a Catholic Perspective, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C. 1970," pp.13-14)

One of the puzzling aspects of my life for these five years as a Roman Catholic staff member of the National Council of Churches is to find that so many Roman Catholics are untouched by a truly ecumenical spirit. The irony lies in the fact that we Catholics alone have a public magisterial document of anything like the authority of the Decree on Ecumenism. No national Protestant Church has ever issued such an extensive and theologically penetrating document, to my knowledge. Yet few Catholics seem to realize and live by the thought expressed by the Cardinal in Atlanta.

"We Catholics believe that the one Church of Christ *subsists in* the Roman Catholic Church (Decree on Ecumenism, No. 8) but cannot be perfectly identified with it, because other Christian communities have developed and manifested church-building elements which are Christian means of salvation. In meeting with these churches, the Catholic Church can also receive the authentic Christian heritage which they have treasured and fostered in separation. Catholic ecumenical life, then, does not look to a return to the past but searches for a reconciliation in the future." (Ibid., pp. 19-20)

I quote Cardinal Willebrands at such length because he is chairman of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and was speaking to a group which is struggling with the question of what God is asking of His Church in local communities. This is where the intermediate steps must be taken, of course. The first one would

seem to be the matter of educating for ecumenical life.

The Decree on Ecumenism of 1965 remains the strongest and most extensive ecclesial statement that any church presently has. The Roman Catholic tradition is expressed in it by the highest magisterial authority. Yet the message has been only spottily transmitted to our church; that is, the 500 million Catholics living all over the world. Spottily, because we have also seen wonderful developments in many places as a consequence of this new attitude of the teaching Church. For now, though, we consider some of the baffling and distressing facts about the Roman Catholic community in 1971.

In a survey taken by the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs taken in 1969-70, of all the Ecumenical Commissions in dioceses around the country, a high percentage of replies (92 out of 107) was received. The results were given by Msgr. Bernard Law, Executive Secretary of BECIA, at the National Ecumenical Workshop in Kansas City, Missouri, on March 15, 1970. Given options ranging from enthusiasm to hostility, the diocesan ecumenical officers evaluated both priests and laity in about the same way regarding attitudes. The priests were negatively disposed in a little more than half the cases; the laity were just about the same. Negative dispositions in these cases could range from indifference to hostility, but negative they were. For those of us who are working in the ecumenical vineyard, this was a disturbing phenomenon. It seemed to say clearly that the change in the Roman Catholic teaching concerning our brethren in Christ was not effectively reaching the greater part of our people.

This fear has been borne out. The executive of a State Council of Churches where the Roman Catholic dioceses are very well disposed toward ecumenical life told me that he simply cannot count on finding a Roman Catholic predisposed in favor of ecumenism. He must approach each one warily, feeling the person out until he discovers whether he or she is well or ill disposed toward the ecumenical imperative.

The same situation exists in many other places and can be documented. My Catholic world divides roughly along the same lines: those who know of and accept the change in the Catholic Church's tradition, and those who either do not know or have rejected this change. There are all kinds of variations within these large categories, of course, but the general factors remain determinative. Many Catholics are still under the impression that to be loyal to the Church requires them to think and act as if we Catholics *alone* are "the Body of Christ." We were brought up on this as certain and true, and many of us have not kept up with the change.

This is an education gap which should have been shelved long ago, but has not been. The BCEIA has done much and valiant work under the leadership of Monsignor, now Bishop, William Baum and Msgr. Bernard Law, but it has been a low-priority item on the agenda of the national Catholic Church. This is largely due to the style of life of the Catholic Church in America, of course, where diocesan staffs and efforts are really the key to unlocking the energies of the Catholic Church in this country, and quite properly so. Father John Hotchkin of Chicago, Associate of both previous Directors, has now taken over as

Executive Director, with the help of Father Daniel McKenzie of Cincinnati, and will undoubtedly carry on effectively. Up to now, however, the major efforts of the office have been directed toward "brass roots" ecumenism at the international and national levels, primarily in theological discussions. These were the appropriate opportunities immediately after the Council when other national communions were intensely interested in investigating the theological changes announced by Vatican II.

That stage seems to be drawing to an end now, as the hierarchies and theologians have come to know one another fairly well. They trust one another as committed Christians within the same ecclesial community, divided as it is into different "churches." They have reached a fairly general agreement that "The Church" exists in the "diverse churches" of the world. We Roman Catholics hold, as in No. 8 of the Decree on Ecumenism, that the Church "subsists" in the Roman Catholic community in an unique way. But we are willing to dialogue with other communions on terms of essential equality, and this is a new stance for us to take.

The time seems wonderfully at hand, then, for "brass roots" ecumenism to yield in emphasis, time, and effort to what is sometimes termed "grass roots" ecumenism. Father Avery Dulles suggested this two years ago, so I do not claim it as a new idea. I do affirm that the urgency has been renewed and the opportunity is golden. The education gap needs to be filled, and if Catholics are to be faithful to Christ, it must be filled.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this gap can be filled by you in

a very significant way, if you will exercise your God-given prerogative within the Church of speaking up as Catholic laity on the subjects within your special competence. The style will be *respectful dialogue*, which is the style of the scientific community today and is rapidly that of the churches. Such dialogue means listening — not simply being in the same room within earshot of another. It means antecedent respect for the other and the opinions expressed, whether at variance with or in contradiction to one's own opinions. It means refusing to become angry or rejected or bitter or unkind. It means trying to be empathetic with the others with whom one is in dialogue. It means unfailing courtesy, prudence and deep human love.

Such respectful dialogue is desperately needed within our Roman Catholic community today, as well as across denominational lines. The two most difficult issues presently among us as a nation and dividing us Catholics from the other religious people of our time, are public aid to private schools, and abortion. That does not mean that these are the two most important issues of our time; the war in Vietnam and the national issue of human rights are no doubt more important. But for people like us, Catholics of the "middle American class," and for medical people, the question of abortion and abortion-laws seems to be paramount. One of the most disturbing developments has been the almost denominationalization of the abortion issue, whereby it seems to be a "Catholics versus Protestants and Jews" issue. We all know that no religious community divides so neatly along any moral line, including that of abortion. Yet all too often the public media make it seem

to be a peculiarly Catholic position as against a universal Protestant-Jewish position on the matter. I think you can help change this false impression a great deal. The question of the morality of abortion is the first one we need to address, and is quite distinct from the second question about abortion-laws. As regards the first question, I commend to you a volume of the Jesuit theological periodical, *Theological Studies* for March of 1970. The entire issue concerns abortion, and is one of the best and most comprehensive treatments of the subject that I know. It recognizes the complexity of the matter and stresses the impossibility of reaching any clear cut *a priori* answers on many of the problem areas concerned. It is a resource which will help anyone to understand the complexity of the matter.

Church statements about abortion all too often disregard this complexity. You and I are familiar with statements such as, "Abortion is murder." Defining abortion as life present from conception on, and identifying it as "murder" destroys all possibility of respectful dialogue with others who do not hold this position, for there is simply no possibility of any change in the opinion so stated. Murder may not be done under any circumstances. I suggest to you that this is no way to begin or to ensure a respectful dialogue with others. It is no way to achieve the purpose of Roman Catholics in this dialogue: an effective witness to the sanctity and seriousness of intra-uterine human life from the moment of conception on.

All churches and practically all religious people are equally vehement about "respect for human life." The National Council of Churches' Department of Family Ministries has com-

piled statements on abortion by denominations and church-related agencies. I would like to read pertinent sections from a couple of them. The Lutheran Church of America in 1970 stated:

"In the consideration of induced abortion the key issue is the status of the unborn fetus. Since the fetus is the organic beginning of human life, the termination of its development is always a serious matter. Nevertheless, a qualitative distinction must be made between its claims and the rights of a responsible person made in God's image who is in living relationships with God and other human beings. This understanding of responsible personhood is congruent with the historical Lutheran teaching and practice whereby only living persons are baptized. On the basis of the evangelical ethic, a woman or couple may decide responsibly to seek an abortion. Earnest consideration should be given to the life and total health of the mother, her responsibilities to others in her family, the stage of development of the fetus, the economic and psychological stability of the home, the laws of the land, and the consequences for society as a whole. Persons considering abortion are encouraged to consult with their physicians and spiritual counselors. This church upholds its pastors and other responsible counselors, and persons who conscientiously make decisions about abortion."

The American Baptist Convention in 1968 stated:

"Because Christ calls us to affirm the freedom of persons and the sanctity of life, we recognize that abortion should be a matter of responsible personal decision. To this end we as American Baptists urge that legislation be enacted to provide: 1) that the termination of a pregnancy prior to the end of the twelfth week be at the request of the individuals concerned and be regarded as an elective medical procedure governed by the laws regulating medical practice and licensure. 2) After that period the termination of a pregnancy shall be performed only by a duly licensed

physician in a regularly licensed hospital for one of the following reasons as suggested by the model penal code of the American Law Institute. . . ."

These statements are fairly typical of American Protestant communities. Many Catholics would consider them as responsible statements able to be followed as directives by any Christian. And yet we surely have our own contribution to make to this discussion. As long ago as March, 1967, *America* magazine ran an article on "Abortion Debate and 'Tough' Ecumenism," advocating a "full, frank and free discussion of our most basic differences as well as our most basic similarities. The most grievous danger to ecumenism is not to be found in forthright controversy but in the fear that 'tough' ecumenism is impossible."

That same magazine on May 9, 1970, published "an open letter to American doctors" on the subject of abortion and abortion-laws. We might well utilize this editorial in our discussion with the wider medical community. The need for careful preparation is emphasized by the title of the one general session of the American Medical Association, "Abortion — a Legal Fact." From the looks of it, the subject will be treated solely from the point of view that laws exist, and not at all from the moral and religious points of view. I hope that one or other of you will attend that session and send me some report of it. (Dr. John Burke of Framingham, Massachusetts, kindly fulfilled Father Bowman's request and sent an excellent commentary on the session.)

The second *America* editorial says that three factors currently muddy the discussion: 1) the emotional dimension; 2) the cultural dimension; and 3)

the atmosphere. It goes on to say:

"By saying that the issue is human life and death, we do not deny the reality of these other problems. Nor do we insist that you agree with our assessment of fetal personhood. We may differ here. We know that many of our conscientious fellow citizens do indeed disagree. The fact, however, that many of your fellow citizens regard nascent life as sharing in the respect and protections we accord extra-uterine persons means to us that you must confront this as the basic issue and resolve it in a way that meets the demands of your conscience. For a profession that rightly glories in a tradition of *primum non nocere* ("the first rule is to do no injury"), any other attitude would be medically risky and humanly irresponsible. . . . We do not ask that your ultimate conclusion agree with ours, but we would be happy if it did. We ask only that you take truly arduous and thoughtful steps forming your conscience before claiming the privilege of following it. If you do not, we will begin to fear you and the increasing recklessness of your power over our lives. But if you do, we will respect the sincerity of your convictions. Most importantly, our trust in you will grow, even in disagreement. For if, individually and as a group, healers of men are doing everything possible to find and do the truth as they see it, we can rest satisfied that the medical profession will continue its proud tradition at the head of those who revere and respect the individual life."

Such Catholic words are "respectful dialogue," in my judgment. I hope that you will speak them and other similar words within the Catholic communities where you live, so that the intra-community discussion will more and more take on the aspects of decent dialogue. To do this, you must inform our priests and pastors and bishops about the best medical judgment regarding both abortion and

abortion-laws in your State. You must take advantage of your opportunity, in view of Vatican II's declaration that we *all* are in the Church. You have the opportunity to dialogue within the Church, with Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and all other Christians. You have the opportunity to dialogue as Church-men with our Jewish and other believing brethren. You have the opportunity to help take the bitterness out of this frequently bitter discussion.

We all call upon Christ as our Redeemer. Redemption in 1971 is going on, we believe. Surely we can see the reconciliation produced among men of good will by respectful dialogue as an essential element in that redemption which we believe Christ is working even now. To hark back to the Gospel according to Mark, Christ's healing was always in the context of bringing the Kingdom of God to pass here on earth. He healed bodies and spirits; he healed minds and souls and memories by His teaching and example. He brought a sympathy and reconciliation wherever He went, and thereby became the Redeemer of his contemporaries. Our Catholic life, our Christian life is surely in large part an imitation of Christ's own life: reconciliation which really is redemption. For this reason, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I propose to you as your unique ecumenical opportunity that you contribute your medical wisdom and Catholic conscientiousness to the dialogue on abortion and abortion-laws. You can truly share the redemptive grace of Christ in your own unique way.